J Happiness Stud (2009) 10:253–255
DOI 10.1007/s10902-007-9073-2

BOOK REVIEW

Our Imagination of Future Happiness and Its Shortcomings

Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness*

Vintage Books, Random House, New York 2007, 310 pp, ISBN 978-1-4000-7742-7

Jan Ott

Published online: 6 October 2007

Daniel Gilbert is Professor of Psychology at Harvard and has won numerous awards for teaching and research. His book "Stumbling on Happiness" reflects his academic qualities. It is also very readable and written with a good sense of humor.

Gilbert distinguishes between moral happiness, judgmental happiness, and emotional happiness. Moral happiness is happiness based on—or reached by—some kind of morality, like Aristotle's "eudemonia". Judgmental happiness is contentment about something specific, like a snack, an event or a plan. Emotional happiness is happiness in the usual meaning of a general feeling, or a subjective state. This emotional happiness is the subject of Gilbert's book.

Almost at the end of the book Gilbert writes that people can generally say how happy they are at the moment they are asked. This is an important advantage of experience sampling, where people report spontaneously about their current happiness. The role of cognition is very limited in their answers. Cognition plays a more important role if people are asked about their happiness in the past, or about their expected happiness in the future.

Gilbert describes some serious failings in our memory and foresight. As a consequence of these failings we accord a negative image to our future happiness and we make bad decisions over and over again. Gilbert is not very explicit about the consequences, but the obvious implication is that there are negative effects on happiness.

Before discussing some questions in relation to Gilbert's book I will first summarize some crucial steps in his argument. A general problem in understanding happiness is the limitation of human empathy. People cannot understand that a Siamese twin, or paralyzed person, can be happy at all. At this point Gilbert could also have mentioned the inability of happy people to understand unhappiness, such as the unhappiness of people suffering from fear and anxiety. However, even within the limits of their empathy, people make mistakes about their own future happiness. As Gilbert points out, people overestimate the impact of possible events. They overestimate the positive impact of getting a promotion and having

J. Ott (✉)
Erasmus University Rotterdam, Stevinstraat 225, Den Haag 2587 EH, The Netherlands
e-mail: jan.ott@fsw.eur.nl

children, and they overestimate the negative impact of getting in an accident and the loss of a loved one.

Gilbert presents an explanation; the human being is the only animal that thinks about the future and has the ability to imagine events. The human brain is an "anticipation machine" and "making future" is the most important thing that it does. Thinking about the future is pleasurable and imagining bad events is functional, because fear, worry and anxiety evoke action. About 12% of our daily thoughts are about the future. All this imagination supports a popular idea: we steer ourselves through the river of time, going to places where we want to be, avoiding places where we don't want to be. According to Gilbert this idea is totally wrong. We make serious mistakes and we do not really know where we want to go. We suffer, more specifically, from three shortcomings in our imagination.

1. Realism: imagination works so quickly, quietly and effectively that we are insufficiently skeptical of its products. We do not miss elements in our perception, even if we should!
2. Presentism: the imagined future looks very much like the actual present because we are unable to predict many things, so we use the present situation—or an extrapolation—as a standard. Our imagination is too conservative, we are trapped in a place, a time, and a circumstance; and our attempts to use our minds to transcend those boundaries are ineffective.
3. Rationalization: things will look different once they happen, in particular bad things will look better because we will always find some positive interpretation. Gilbert could also have mentioned that people often underestimate their own resilience and potential resources.

In short, our ideas and expectations about our future happiness are wrong. Pleasant, or unpleasant perhaps, they cause us to make the same mistakes over and over again!

Gilbert explains why we—in general!—are not corrected by other people, elderly people included. He mentions two possibilities, the first is that the advice we get is bad advice. This is partially true according to Gilbert. The quality of happiness advice varies, sometimes it is reasonable and sometimes it is disputable. Disputable advice is often based on popular beliefs, like "money makes happy" or "children make happy". Perhaps these aphorisms are functional for society as a whole, but not for the individuals concerned.

The second possibility Gilbert mentions, is that people foolishly reject the good advice they get. This is more than partially true according to Gilbert. It happens frequently, since people overestimate their own uniqueness and usually consider advice from other people as irrelevant. Why are people so optimistic about their personal uniqueness?

a. They know themselves better than other people.
b. They enjoy thinking about themselves as very special.
c. They tend to overestimate individual uniqueness in general. Social scientists care about similarities, but other people care about uniqueness!

Now we can discuss some questions in relation to this book.

Are we really misinformed about our future happiness by our poor imaginations? The short answer is "yes", because we change and the world is changing. We go through different biological stages with different and rather unpredictable needs and possibilities. Also, the opportunities and problems the world will offer us in the next decennia are rather unpredictable. But "rather unpredictable" is not "completely unpredictable". There is happiness-research and there are libraries, planning bureaus, trend watchers, coaches and therapists, to support our individual imaginations. There are no recipes for future

individual happiness, but there is a lot of knowledge available about conditions for happiness, and about the consequences of individual decisions. Perhaps we are misinformed, but we do have a lot of useful information! One thing we can do is improve our "self-knowledge", knowing what we want and knowing at what points we are really unique, or "just similar" to other people. Such knowledge supports our adaptability, it helps us to select relevant information, and it helps us to make better decisions.

Do we really make bad decisions as a consequence of our negative imaginations? Gilbert presents some examples of "bad decisions". On page 217: "We marry people who are oddly like the people we divorced, we attend annual family gatherings and make an annual vow never to return, and we carefully time our monthly expenditures to ensure we will once again be flat broke on all the days that begin with a three." And on page 235: "And yet, the average American moves more than six times, changes job more than ten times, and marries more than once, which suggests that most of us are making more than a few poor choices". First of all, we may wonder if changing jobs, getting divorced and going to unpleasant parties are a symptom of bad decisions. Jobs, marriages and parties can be, as expected, very rewarding for a while but become unpleasant later on. Secondly, we have to realize that decisions are not only based on imagined future happiness, but also on actual circumstances and necessities. But indeed, negative imagination can cause bad decisions. Sometimes such bad decisions are inevitable because they are the only way to learn, but a better imagination of future happiness can be helpful to prevent unnecessary mishaps. And again: adequate self-knowledge is a general key-point and deserves high priority in this respect.

What are the implications for happiness-research? Gilbert does not discuss this point but his argument is also interesting for happiness research. In "traditional" questionnaires people are asked to answer questions like this: "How happy (or satisfied) are you with your life as a whole these days?" This is a question about current happiness and not about past or future happiness, but an answer requires nevertheless some minimal reflection and cognition. If there are serious shortcomings in our cognition, then we have to take another critical look at this research-approach. On p. 229 and 230 Gilbert describes an experiment. Asian-American and European-American volunteers reported about their happiness in a week by way of experience sampling. The reports showed that Asian-Americans were slightly happier than the European-Americans. But when the volunteers were asked to remember their feelings after a week, the Asian-Americans reported they had felt less happy. The explanation is that Asian culture does not emphasize the importance of personal happiness as much as European culture does. Remembering happiness appears to be a reconstructive process. In this case the volunteers were asked to remember their happiness a week later, but Asian-Americans also got lower scores on the question: "How happy are you with your life as a whole these days". So even in answering such questions, about happiness "these days", culture appears to play some role. This cultural effect deserves attention in happiness research. Discrepancies in the results of experience sampling and the usual questionnaires are a complication, but also a potential source of information about cultural effects in the measurement of happiness.

Perhaps Gilbert is somewhat pessimistic about the corrigibility of false imagination of future happiness, about the impact of false imaginations on decisions, and about the impact of bad decisions on happiness. Correction of imagination is possible: happiness is a popular subject, people are interested, and not all advice is bad advice. Gilbert's book about our human imagination and its shortcomings, is nevertheless important and relevant for happiness research.